

VZCZCXRO3579
PP RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHNP RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHSL #0324/01 2031437
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P R 221437Z JUL 09
FM AMEMBASSY BRATISLAVA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0054
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHSL/AMEMBASSY BRATISLAVA 0078

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BRATISLAVA 000324

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 7/22/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [LO](#)

SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER LAJCAK ON HUNGARY AND FICO'S DESIRE TO VISIT WASHINGTON

REF: BRATISLAVA 320

BRATISLAVA 00000324 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: Keith A. Eddins, Charge d Affaires, EXEC, DOS.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) Summary: During a July 20 dinner with the Charge, Foreign Minister Lajcak lamented the timing but defended the substance of the recently-passed amendments to the Slovak language law. He hoped to defuse the current "overreaction" by working quietly with Hungarian officials and the OSCE's commissioner for national minorities, but acknowledged that the issue may not dissipate quickly or easily. Lajcak pressed the case for a November 2009 White House visit for Prime Minister Fico, arguing that Fico recognized the long-term value of the U.S.-Slovak "strategic relationship" and asserting that a meeting with President Obama would cement our bilateral ties for the duration of Fico's widely-anticipated 2010-2014 second term. Lajcak underscored that he had had to overcome significant personal qualms about joining the Fico government, but described the Prime Minister as now anxious to rid himself of notorious coalition partners Jan Slota and Vladimir Meciar. End Summary.

12. (C) Charge hosted Slovak Foreign Minister Lajcak for a one-on-one dinner July 20, following up on a three-way conversation with Prime Minister Fico at the Embassy's July 2 Independence Day reception, during which Fico had expressed his desire to visit Washington this fall. At our reception, and in a separate July 1 meeting with visiting Slovak Ambassador to the U.S. Burian, the Slovaks had floated the notion of Fico traveling to Washington for a planned November 17 commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the 1989 Velvet Revolution and including a White House visit and meeting in the schedule. In our July 2 conversation, Fico had made a point of reiterating his commitment to Slovak engagement in Afghanistan (including his intention to visit Slovak troops there in October 2009) and his high regard for President Obama and the United States.

Hungary and the Language Law: Bad Timing

13. (C) Before turning to Fico's interest in a visit to the Oval Office, Lajcak raised the ongoing brouhaha with Hungary over Slovakia's passage of amendments to the Slovak language law (reftel). Lajcak argued that the net effect of the law was relatively minor, but lamented the timing of the amendments. He said Europe had been taken aback by the election of three Hungarian ultra-nationalist Jobbik deputies to the European Parliament (as well as the strong showing by Fidesz); Slovak worries about Hungarian irredentism were just beginning to be taken more seriously given the electoral developments south of the Danube. But the Slovak Parliament's passage of the language law amendments immediately cancelled any newfound sympathy for Slovak concerns.

14. (C) Lajcak said that he and his MFA colleagues were now trying to work with their Hungarians counterparts to calm the situation. He had agreed to a Slovak meeting with the OSCE's

high commission for national minorities in hopes of presenting the Slovak arguments calmly and dispassionately, but - he emphasized - separately from the Hungarians. He was convinced that any meeting with Hungarian representatives present would lead to grandstanding. Moreover, he did not want to engage in any act that was seen as negotiating with Hungarian officials over the contents of domestic Slovak legislation.

Fico to Washington?

15. (C) In raising the possibility of a Fico trip to Washington - to include a meeting with President Obama - Lajcak fully acknowledged that the Slovak prime minister had made a number of intemperate statements concerning U.S. policies over the past few years (e.g., on Iraq, missile defense, and Kosovo). Lajcak characterized such comments, however, as not "anti-American" but rather as "anti-Bush Administration policies." He asserted that Fico understood the value of the U.S.-Slovak "strategic relationship," and cited Fico's recent comments to a Slovak ambassadors' conference on the central importance of the U.S. to both Europe and Slovakia. He also argued that we should be looking forward, not backward, and that with Fico widely anticipated to win reelection in 2010, a November 2009 visit to the White House would set the right tone and cement strong bilateral ties for the duration of Fico's likely second term.

Coalition Politics

16. (C) As he has suggested to us before, Lajcak emphasized several times that Fico and his Smer party colleagues are anxious to drop notorious ex-PM Meciar (and his HZDS party) and corrupt nationalist Jan Slota (and his SNS party) from the governing coalition, but that he will have to wait until after the 2010 elections. Lajcak was particularly scathing in his comments about Slota, who he described as an "embarrassment" to Slovakia and to Fico's government. Musing over what the next Slovak government might look like, Lajcak acknowledged that the

BRATISLAVA 00000324 002.2 OF 002

ethnic-Hungarian party SMK might have been the obvious choice for a coalition partner with Smer, but that recent turmoil within SMK had raised real doubts as to whether the ethnic Hungarians - in whatever form - would secure enough deputies in 2010 to form a two-party government with Smer. If not, Lajcak suggested that the Christian Democrats (KDH) could be brought in to complete a three-party governing coalition.

Russia and the West

17. (C) As the dinner was drawing to a close, Lajcak raised the recent open letter to President Obama on Russia that was signed by Vaclav Havel, Lech Walesa, and a host of other prominent Central Europeans. While expressing sympathy with their thesis that Central Europe still deserved to be taken seriously by the U.S., he disagreed with the implicit zero-sum argument that an improvement in U.S.-Russian relations came at the expense of NATO and Central Europe. Engaging effectively with Russia, he argued, was essential to Slovakia (particularly because of its energy needs), the U.S., and NATO as a whole. He also rejected the notion that Central Europe was "at a crossroads"; rather, he said, the Central European states - including Slovakia - had long since passed through any crossroads and were now well into mainstream Europe.

Embassy Comment

18. (C) Throughout dinner, Lajcak repeatedly reminded the Charge that he had had to overcome significant personal qualms before joining the Fico government. He was scathing in his characterization of Slota as embarrassing - and often damaging - to Slovakia's international reputation. And while he was somewhat less harsh in criticizing Meciar, he fully acknowledged

that many U.S. and Western European observers view Meciar's presence in the Slovak government as damning. But Lajcak's view of his Prime Minister was uniformly positive, particularly in describing Fico's commitment to improving relations with the U.S. From our perspective, however, Fico's interest in visiting Washington this November is more likely a reflection of domestic political considerations. With President Bush no longer in office, President Obama offering a new image in the White House, and the Iraq war, missile defense and Kosovo no longer page-one stories here, Fico's electoral calculation is quite different than in 2006. At that time, bashing American policies and American leaders probably earned him many more votes than it lost; next year that equation is likely to be reversed. Thus, even if the desire to enhance U.S.-Slovak relations is more political rhetoric than substance, Fico will strive to gain credit for maintaining solid bilateral ties. But given the current Slovak government's three-year track record, we are not convinced that welcoming Fico into the Oval Office will necessarily advance U.S. interests, let alone accomplish Lajcak's stated goal of "cementing" the U.S.-Slovak relationship for the next four years.

EDDINS